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Luca Pisano

REWRITING MEMORIES: GLIMPSES ON THE LITERARY DESCRIPTIONS OF TAIPEI'S "CITY SOUTH" (CHENGNAN)

Literature, spatiality and hegemonic power

In the field of the cultural geography, the subjectivity of the literary experience has gained particular attention as peculiar expression of the different ways space can be perceived, described, and sometimes rewritten (Crang 1998, 44). Therefore, literature, as a form of representation, never refers to a simple objective space but it can make a decisive contribution in the formation of a geographic imagery, to understand the possible social meanings related to certain places; through series of symbols and signs is thus possible to draw out the geographic individuality and the contours of spaces as real cultural landscapes.

Since the XVI century, the city and the urban space have been chosen as preferred background of a growing number of literary works in Europe, a phenomenon mainly related with the social and economic transformations that have gradually brought to inevitable changes of space and, consequently, of its perception. Even in the sinophone context, the same development can be seen since the beginning of the XX century, as widely stressed in the literature related to the "Pearl of the Orient" Shanghai from the 20s to the 40s (Brizay 2010, 14; Lee 1999, ch.2).

Regarding the city of Taipei and the related literary works, the topic is more complex as we need to take into account the distinction between the colonial and postcolonial periods, primarily for all the linguistic and cultural implications associated to these different phases. It was pointed out, in fact, how the Japanese had a decisive contribution in the urban planning development of Taipei/Taihoku, which included the areas of Dadaocheng 大稻埕 and Mengjia 艋舺, first commercial settlements located outside the city walls (no longer in existence, dating back to the period of domination by the Manchu) along the east bank of the Danshui river (Yao 2006, 47-48). Beside the priority to impose (even by force) a pacification of the island, the new urban plans clearly revealed their colonialist aspirations, mainly associated with a cosmopolitan vision of potential (as well as ambiguous) assimilation of local people, carried out since the 20s to make the *hontōjin* 本島人 (the islanders) loyal subjects of the Tenno, the emperor of Japan. This plan

of integration took a substantial shift during the last period of the domination (1931-1945) with the enforcement of the cultural plan *Kōminka undo* 皇民化運動 (Imperial Subject Movement) that involved radical changes in some practices of Taiwanese daily life. However, only educated people identified with *kōminka* while the rest of the population remained marginalized, outside hegemonic control (Fong 2006, 175). This aspect is revealed in some literary works of the period as in *Xiansheng Ma* 先生媽 [The Doctor's Mother] (1945) by Wu Zhuoliu 吳濁流 (1900-1976), and *Dao* 道 [The Path] (1943) by Chen Huoquan 陳火泉 (1908-1999) where the struggles of the main characters to become and be recognized as Japanese fellows had to face the harsh reality of disillusionment and identity crisis when they eventually realize that the Japanese didn't considered Taiwanese people as human beings (Kleeman 2003, 218).

With the end of WWII, the Nationalist government (already ruling over the mainland territory) went at once to occupy all those empty spaces left by the Japanese, on the one hand censuring their influence on the island but on the other accepting the colonialist stance (Allen 2012, 35). Following the KMT exodus to Taiwan since 1949, it starts a new era with massive sinocentric propaganda, avoiding any reference to the colonial past, but exploiting the symbolic value of buildings and premises erected by the Japanese as display of their hegemonic supremacy, through a process of both removing and replacing the related ideological discourse. In the following decades, the urban planning of the capital proceeded according to this principle, trying to promote the city as a part of the rhetoric of the "authentic Chinese" bulwark. Street-renaming was indeed among the earliest priorities of the KMT government policies during the de-japanization of the island in 1946 (Hung, Fong 2014, 90). However, street-renaming strategy was not such primary concern for the previous Japanese rulers: they did not rename the streets of Taiwan until the mid-occupation period, implementing the project of renomination of the chō 町 (the Japanese municipality system) in 1916, initially in the cities of Tainan and Taichung and later (1922) in Taipei (Huang 2011, 50-51). While the Japanese government showed some respect to the Taiwanese local history retaining the most traditional place-names for their new *chō* names (mainly in Taipei but not in Tainan and Taichung that adopted full Japanese style place names), the KMT government renaming program was expected to carry forward the Chinese spirit, to propagandize the Three People's Principles of Sun Yat-sen, to commemorate national figures and to present the local geography. Therefore, shortly after 1947, all Taipei's streets were renamed according to place names of mainland China, erasing local identity and the identification of the residents with their locality (Huang 2011, 54). Looking at the architecture, the KMT government continued to take advantage of the still widely present Japanese heritage for its own purposes; only starting from the 70s, it assisted the construction of buildings with tough ideological claims, as the Sun Yat-sen Memorial Hall and the Chiang Kai-shek Memorial Hall (Allen 2012, 126-127). These sites, as well as many of those

referred to the Japanese colonial past, are now deeply rooted in the collective consciousness of the local people, and contributed to shape their sense of belonging to the space they live in.

In the context of Taiwanese literature, the earliest attestation of Taipei's urban space as background of literary products can be seen in the narrative of some authors from the Japanese colonial period. Glimpses of the city appear as shadows in the tale describing the vicissitudes of the indolent character of *Moluo* 沒落 [Decline] (1935) by Wang Shilang 王詩琅 (1908-1984) or as the bustling capital celebrating the 40th anniversary of the Japanese rule over the island with the organization of an international fair in *Qiu xin* 秋信 [Autumn letter] (1936) by Zhu Dianren 朱點人 (1903-1949). However, although we still cannot find a peculiar awareness towards the perception of the urban space, the above works are crucial as accounts of the living style of the city as opposed to the rural spaces narrated by the earliest nativist writers of the period, Lai He 賴和 (1894-1943), Lü Heruo 呂赫若 (1914-1951), Yang Kui 楊逵 (1905-1985), Long Yingzong 龍瑛宗 (1911-1999).

After 1945, during the first phase of the KMT presence in Taiwan, Taipei occupied only a marginal role, to appear with increasing frequency since the mid-60s onwards thanks to the flourishing of the Taiwanese literary modernism. As consequence of Taiwan's economic boom, since the 70s the urban space (not only Taipei itself) became the standard context of a large number of literary oeuvres, no matters which stylistic choices individual authors opted for. This occurrence needs to be considered in the wider context of the literary debate on the "return to the native" (*huigui xiangtu* 回歸鄉土) started at the turn of the 1970s and with its climax between 1977-8, when the critical discourse exposed an increasing virulent politicization. The choice of the urban space as literary background was a quite common feature among modernist writers in opposition to nativists who chose programmatically to focus on rural settings. This kind of literary practices revealed merely one of the conflicts between modernist and nativist writers on the *façade* of the literary debate. More serious theoretical essays on the matter showed that such a conflict would have only a marginal impact on the authentic significance and the aims of literary products; in a remarkable article, the writer Wang Tuo 王拓 (1944-2016) in 1977 proposed that, instead of writing about rural regions and country people, Nativist literature should be concerned with the "here and now" of Taiwan society, which embraces a wide range of social environments and people, reflecting the social reality and the material and psychological aspirations of its people (Chang 1993, 159). From this perspective, it seems that the choice of specific context as urban spaces can be also considered as an appropriation of a distinctive trait of the nativist ideology with emphasis on local space as a crucial factor in the shaping of the cultural identity.

Only in recent times, scholars have begun to turn their attention to the cultural references related to spaces as part of the narrative background from Taiwanese writers (e.g. see Xingzhengyuan wenhua jianshe weiyuanhui 2008;

Li 2011). Following the postmodern stream and its peculiar perception of urban space, it has been noted that some authors have developed very heterogeneous sensitivity in relation to the very same places where they set their works. This type of investigation that analyses the relationships between landscape and literature is still blooming and achieving more orderliness, since the manifold perspectives the research works are carried out from (Fan 2015, 228).

Taipei's "City South"

Because of the large amount of literary references related to the city of Taipei, this paper will focus exclusively on some of those referring to a specific urban area of the capital, known today as *chengnan* 城南, namely "the south of the city". This designation dates back at least to 1901 when the Japanese government drew maps for urban planning of the area south of the ancient walls of Taipei, to set up a new neighborhood in the exclusive use of Japanese residents. When, in 1945, the Japanese left the island, this area was already extended to the eastern gate of the city and later, in 1949, following the KMT migration from the mainland, the whole area was gradually occupied by the intelligentsia loyal to Chiang Kai-shek. This zone, today roughly located in the triangle enclosed by Heping East Road, Xinsheng South Road and Roosevelt Road Sec. 3, was remembered for the presence of the residences of many famous intellectuals, as well as for the teaching staff dormitories of Taipei's most renowned universities together with many eminent independent bookstores and publishing houses, all located in the nearby, flourished starting from the end of the 1970s and the first half of the 1980s. Most of them started their business as publishers and circumspect advocates of the Dangwai 黨外 movement (opposition parties were still forbidden at that time), spreading their publications among ardent supporters. After the lifting of the martial law (1987) and the change in the political climate, many publishers shifted their activities to bookstores, mainly specializing in academic books (Taiwan duli shudian wenhua xiehui 2016, 93). Writer Yang Jiaxian 楊佳嫻 (1978) from Kaohsiung described her first approach with the *chengnan* bookstores with a lively account of Tonsan Books 唐山書店, one of the earliest of the area (Yang 2006, 105).

Generally aligned with the KMT propaganda, the strong influence of an idealized traditional Chinese culture imported from the mainland can be felt in the whole environment, as summarized by author Lin Liang 林良 (1924) in his short essay "Wenfeng fumian hua chengnan" 文風拂面話城南 [Brushing literary breeze narrates the south of the city] who recalls that most of the staff working in the building of the Committee for the Promotion of the National Language lived in its proximity, especially in an alley (Chongqing South Road, Sec.3, Lane 36) thus nicknamed "National Language Alley" (Lin 2007, 26).

The genuine display of the appropriation of cultural elements from the colonial

past reveals the most distinctive common trait of literary works settled in *chengnan*; this is particularly worth of attention, as it is clearly at odds with the KMT policy of the forced suppression of Japanese culture influence carried on from 1949 onwards.

What seems to emerge from various accounts shows that this process of appropriation is often a reflection of the nostalgia for an idealized past, far away not only in time but in distance. The common denominator in the different representations of this peculiar urban landscape is symbolized by the Japanese-style houses that occupied much of the area and were mainly used as private residences by authorities and academics arriving from mainland China, after the Japanese left the island.

This area, from its earliest days, had a strong cultural flavor preserved for decades especially around his button vein, namely Wenzhou Street (Wenzhou Jie 溫州街). This street, with its narrow alleys and intersections, has had a profound influence that can be traced in a large number of literary works, some of which seem to convey the intellectual atmosphere that reigned there and, despite the changes over the years, is still perceptible today.

One of the earliest literary account can be found in the renowned short novel "Dongye" 冬夜 [Wintry Night], published for the first time in 1970 by Bai Xianyong (1937) on the literary journal *Xiandai wenxue*, and whose background is set in prof. Yu Qinlei's Japanese-style home. Yu Qinlei, an English literature professor at Peking University, followed the Nationalist army at the end of the civil war, moving to Taiwan and continuing his profession in a local university. The storyline is focused on the meeting of Yu Qinlei with his old companion, Wu Zhuguo 吳柱國 who, in the meantime, became a well-known professor of Chinese history in the US and was in Taiwan for a conference at Academia Sinica. Their encounter is both a nostalgic reminiscence of the common past (the idealistic spirit of their direct involvement in the protests of May Forth 1919 uprise) as well as a manifestation of the frustrations and futility of the present (the dissolution of May Forth Movements' ideals, the compromises they both had to accept to face post-1949 life), it's the inevitable victory of the "reality" of the present over the "idealism" of the past (Ouyang 1976, 281). The description of Yu's residence gives the impression of a decaying, nearly abandoned house: that's clearly the representation of Yu Qinlei's hopeless thoughts towards its approaching old age; "with the incursion of the cold of 'the present age', 'Wenzhou' cannot warm up anymore" (Ouyang 1976, 303. In the last section there's clearly a word pun regarding the actual meaning of the first character *wen* of Wenzhou) The use of literary parallelisms, such as the above one, is hidden in many points of the novel: in this case Yu Qinlei's feelings are the results of both general considerations rising from the discussion with prof. Wu, as well as from personal difficulties, for example the accident that made him lame on the right leg and forced him to renounce the much sought-after grant that would allow him to teach abroad (Ouyang 1976, 278, 282). Bai Xianyong knows very well the environment described in the novel: he studied at the National Taiwan

University (NTU) at the end of the 50s, joining the intellectual atmosphere of the time, and starting his academic career in the USA few years later. It should be remembered that many famous scholars such as Yin Haiguang 殷海光 (1919-1969), Liang Shiqiu 梁實秋 (1903-1987), Tai Jingnong 臺靜農 (1902-1990), Zheng Qian 鄭騫 (1906-1991), lived right in those Japanese-style houses of the *chengnan* area.

As well as Bai Xianyong, Lin Wenyue pursued an academic career, in this case remaining in her own *alma mater*, thus becoming a close colleague of the aforementioned Tai Jingnong and Zheng Qian in the Chinese Department at NTU. Tai and Zheng are the main characters of Lin Wenyue's essay "Wenzhou Jie dao Wenzhou Jie" 溫州街到溫州街 [From Wenzhou Street to Wenzhou Street], where she recalls the last gathering between her two old masters, both living in traditional Japanese-style residences in Wenzhou Street but in two different alleys, not so far away from each other, nevertheless a long distance for two old men. Through Lin Wenyue's descriptions, Zheng and Tai seem to embody the figures of intellectuals arising from the past, whose dialogues are reminiscent of the traditional Chinese culture. The entire scene seems a return to indistinct bygone days, filled with an unutterable longing, even expressed by their long silences. It's a picture on the verge of the disappearance; Lin Wenyue was aware of this, and that's why she wished to preserve it in her own script. The antiquity, idealized in the nationalist rhetoric, is represented here in the spontaneity of the two protagonists, with their difficulties in adjusting to a present they don't feel to belong to. The passing, shortly afterwards, of the two old friends became the symbol of a world vanishing forever along with the places that hosted it (both their homes had been torn down thereafter), leaving behind only the shadows of its past, and the melancholy of those who lived it.

However, the most detailed and thoughtful literary descriptions of the *chengnan* area can be found in two works written by prominent female writers: *Wenzhou Jie de gushi* 溫州街的故事 [Tales from Wenzhou Street] by Li Yu 李渝 (1944-2014); and *Yunhe* 雲和 by Yang Jiaxian. Although these two oeuvres were published within fifteen years of each other, they describe two distant worlds, at least half a century apart. In Li Yu's stories, we find the narration of the author's childhood when, just three years old, she left mainland China with his parents to relocate in Taipei, right in Wenzhou Street, since his father had become professor at the geography department of the NTU. In the 80s, after moving to the United States, Li Yu started to set down her childhood memories linked to Wenzhou Street. Yang Jiaxian moved to Taipei to study at National Chengchi University first, and then at NTU. The title of her collection of short stories - *Yunhe* - refers to Yunhe Street (Yunhe Jie 雲和街), an intersection of Wenzhou Street, crossing the very center of *chengnan,* where she lived during her university years. Apart from the age difference of the two authors, it is therefore clear that for Li Yu Wenzhou Street represents primarily the location of her private affections, consequently her accounts are inspired by personal and family matters. Quite different is Yang Jiaxian's perspective, describing Yunhe

Street and the surrounding area mainly inspired by the aura of the importance those places have had in the past, as yearning for the good old days.

Although Li Yu wrote her stories in an epoch in which the reckless urban development had stretched in the *chengnan*, her priority is however to linger on the narration of places and people of the past. Her stories sometimes seem to dwell on apparently insignificant details, but conferring greater spontaneity in a broad context where the Japanese-style houses are just part of a larger landscape. In the appropriation of those buildings once used by the Japanese, the reader can notice the attempt of the new occupants to charge them with symbolic significance, in their aware idealization of the earlier life in mainland China (Lin 2012, 32); as well as the Japanese built those dwellings on the basis of their own conventions, in the same way the new residents seem to consider them as allegory of their condition of displacement and alienation. While those lodges maintained the original shape, is possible to perceive how the domestic environments rather reproduced an atmosphere with intrinsically Chinese connotations. In Li Yu's accounts, it is clear how this phenomenon occurred with unaffectedness, especially considering the high cultural level of local inhabitants, many of whom were professors at the nearby universities. The heavy idealization of the past in Li Yu's work, can be seen even from the substantial marginalization of interior conflicts of the protagonists: the inertia of the surrounding environment as well as the slow passing of time appear to outline their disposition, mostly denoting a sense of indolence and resignation towards the present. Therefore, every character seems primarily animated by the desire to fulfill the duties of the social role, as though that was a crucial condition for maintaining the order of the traditional society, to keep living in those Japanese-style houses like in bell jar.

Unlike Li Yu, Yang's representation of *chengnan* has much more realistic traits: while Li Yu wrote her stories during the 80s portraying the generation of her parents, Yang Jiaxian shows us how this area has changed over the decades, unfolding its present condition. The different approach of Yang Jiaxian that led to the drafting of *Yunhe* has indeed a relation with the work of Li Yu: it's not the longing for traditional China but for the age Li Yu and her family lived in, filtered through a clear influence of European culture. From Yang Jiaxian's perspective, *chengnan,* with all its illustrious residents of the past, is the cradle of Chinese humanistic civilization in Taiwan, therefore the reverence for this area is meant to capture the *genius loci* that still seems to pervade the environment. Yang also focuses on the Japanese-style residences, but to bring out their value from an historical cultural standpoint, as heritage of Japanese colonial period as well as dwellings of eminent personalities that have left their important intellectual legacy. The realism of Yang's description is rooted in the desire to depict *chengnan* current situation not as a static image but as a moment of transition from one epoch to another. This kind of narrative strategy allows Yang to focus her attention on the way places reverberate on people's feelings: from this point of view, her

approach is rather different than Li Yu's, where priority is given to the vicissitudes of the protagonists, and places are just the background against which they move.

For Yang Jiaxian the main concern is the landscape and its correlation with the surrounding reality. From this point of view, the Japanese-style houses are just one of the many environmental details that are caught by the author during her wanderings like a *flâneuse*. Yang Jiaxian and Li Yu, although from very different perspectives, have been both able to grasp the deep spirit of *chengnan* lying in the intellectual predisposition this area has had over the last 60 years. Yang and Li belong to generational and social contexts far from each other, consequently their perceptions have helped to shape different portraits of the area: in Li Yu, *chengnan* emerges from a past that today seems even further away, as the reflection of a society inevitably anchored to a former epoch and to a kind of sensitiveness now already extinct. Yang Jiaxian unveils the *chengnan* of the present days that related itself with modernity, globalization and the reality of the contemporary age, just opposed to the intellectuals in their ivory towers narrated by Li Yu.

Conclusions

Since culture is always *placed*, both the production of culture and the construction of meaning have strong spatial influence (Chang 2015, 13). The authors who have written about the *chengnan* area are all fully aware of the historical implications of the territory and, in a diachronic view, they seem to show how a material space can contribute to the social construction of an identity. In Taiwan, this is a notoriously sensitive and debated topic, especially considering the last century's history, and it has been and continues to be a motive of animated confrontations and controversies with inevitable political and social implications. From the analysis of the cited literary works, distinct features can be highlighted in the interpretation of the meanings attributed in different epochs to this specific area of the city.

In Li Yu the symbolic value is perhaps the most incisive, and the sense of dislocation is particularly vivid: the Japanese-style homes represent a double dislocation, as legacy of the Japanese colonial period and as symbol of appropriation by continental Chinese intellectuals, the advocates of the cultural hegemony by Chiang Kai-shek in the first decades of KMT government. This latter aspect is particularly clear in the frequent references to traditional Chinese culture, related to a strictly Confucian-style education. Li Yu, from this perspective, is perfectly integrated within this kind of social ethic to the point that no hesitations ever emerged; the strong idealization of the past, in fact, reveals her sense of trust in the values she was raised with. In Yang Jiaxian the sense of dislocation is mainly related to the consciousness of the cultural heritage symbolized by those Japanese-style houses once residences of famous intellectuals; however, the state of abandon of

the few still surviving today looks like a metaphor of the identity crisis pervading the younger generations.

The *chengnan* labyrinth seems now even more difficult to decipher than in the past. In the eyes of a person unaware of its earlier history, *chengnan* appears today nothing but a dense network of sleepy alleys, lined with gloomy concrete buildings. The cultural hegemony of the previous epoch appears to have been dismissed in the name of hybridity as a new concept of cultural authenticity (e.g. see Chen 2006, 147-153), in a geo-historical narrative that attempt to disclose the extant meaning of those facts and circumstances about to fall into oblivion, with the awareness of "how material spaces are complicit in the social construction of identities" (Horton and Kraftl 2014, 166).

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